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# The Importance of Social Media in Crisis Communications



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## Introduction

It's 6 a.m. and your cell phone rings. It's the chief of police and he's called to notify you that one of the largest factories in your community suffered an explosion and has gone up in flames. Emergency responders are on the scene, but battling the blaze could take hours and is bound to disrupt the morning commute of hundreds of citizens. You immediately start to execute your emergency citizen notification plan. You contact the media, you place a message on the homepage of your website, and you send an email to your subscribers. As you wait for more news from the Chief of Police, you worry about all the citizens who won't see your message before getting into their vehicles to start their morning commute.

If you fear that your emergency communication plan is lacking a crucial element, or have already lived through a similar disaster and know you fell short of reaching most citizens, it's time to add social media to your communication mix.

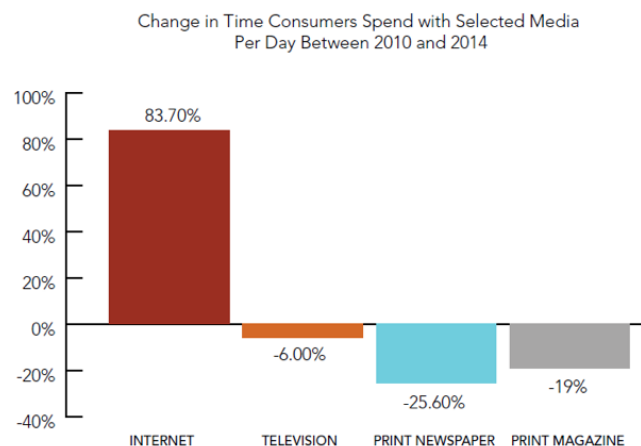
## The Proliferation of Social Media

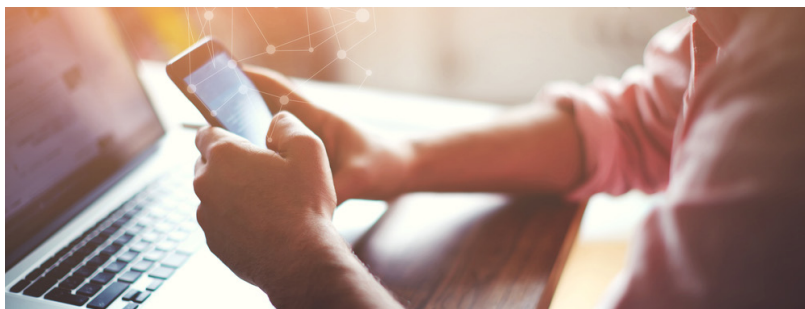
Ten years ago, social media platforms may have seemed like digital toys for teens and tweens, but today, thanks to the overwhelming adoption of social media use by Americans of all ages, social media platforms have metamorphosed into viable communication channels for credible organizations and entities. As of 2017, in the United States, [81 percent](#) of the population has at least one social networking profile. If you think the citizens in your community may not fall in line with national trends, consider these facts from a study conducted by the [Pew Research Center](#):

- 68% of all women use social media, compared with 62 percent of all men.
- 35% of all those 65 years old and older report using social media.
- 56% of citizens living in the lowest income households now use social media.
- 58% of rural residents, 68 percent of suburban residents, and 64 percent of urban residents all use social media.

Not only is social media used by a wide variety of demographics, it is used for a significant portion of those citizens' days and is starting to replace time spent with traditional media. For local governments that have primarily focused their citizen communication strategies around distributing press releases to traditional media outlets, we now know there are more direct, and more impactful ways to communicate with citizens—primarily, through social media.

### Your Social Citizens





## Why Social Media for Crisis Communications?

Social media is an important channel for delivering real-time urgent news and emergency notifications, not only because citizens spend a considerable amount of time utilizing social media each day, but because citizens now expect to learn about breaking news from social media first. According to [Insignia Communications](#), social media is changing the way that consumers learn about breaking news because it:

- Usually breaks on social media first.
- Crosses geographic boundaries more quickly.
- Is informed by multiple first hand, though often unofficial sources.
- Is commented upon by active social media users, which further shares and distributes the content.

Even journalists now watch social media to identify and report breaking news stories. According to Insignia Communications, 77 percent of journalists say social media is important to them for learning about potential stories more quickly, and the same percentage say social media is important in reporting stories more quickly.

## Mobile Social Reach

One of the key reasons that social media can effectively help you reach citizens in times of local emergency is because a significant portion of social media use takes place on mobile devices. According to [Brandwatch](#), there were 1.71 billion monthly active social media users in the world as of July 2016, and 823 million of them only utilize social media from a mobile device, such as a smart phone or tablet. Mobile social media use is only expected to grow. In fact, one million new active mobile social media users are added to the social sphere every day, the equivalent of one every 12 seconds. That means you can effectively use social media to reach citizens with critical news and instructions no matter where they are in the community.



### What's Holding You Back from Implementing a Social Media Emergency Communication Strategy?

In local government, where budgets and staffs run lean, many emergency communication managers cite lack of staff as the primary reason they haven't already incorporated social media into their emergency response strategy. If staffing and time management concerns are among your reasons, know that with a preplanned, disciplined communication strategy and the right tools, social can easily be incorporated into your messaging channels, helping to amplify the reach of your urgent news and instructions. An [emergency and routine mass notification solution](#) can allow you to integrate social media into a multi-channel notification strategy without extra steps or duplicative effort.

## Social Media as a Two-Way Communication Tool

When used during an emergency, social media can help expand the reach of your message due to social sharing and the vast number of citizens who actively utilize the platforms. It can serve as an open communication channel for residents to respond back, ask questions, and provide updates. In fact, during a crisis event, social media's greatest value may be in allowing emergency response managers to learn about what is happening during an event in real time through social media listening. Depending on the type of event, land lines or other more traditional forms of communication may not be available, making one-to-one and one-to-many social media communications essential for communicating with impacted citizens real time.

If you're ready to begin leveraging social media as part of your emergency communication strategy, begin by gaining an understanding of the platforms that will be most valuable and effective in accomplishing your communication needs.

## Key Platforms

According to a 2016 study performed by the [Pew Research Center](#), use of both Facebook and Twitter as a source of news is on the rise, as Americans are actively seeking information about local and national news from these social platforms. 62 percent of Americans report that they get their news from social media. Which platforms are citizens relying upon for news? 66 percent say Facebook, and 59 percent say Twitter, making these two platforms ones that should be incorporated into your social media emergency communication strategy.

### Facebook

- **Usage:** [1.71 billion users](#)
- **Purpose:** To give people the power to share, to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what's going on in the world, and to express what matters to them.
- **Benefits of Use During an Emergency:** 38.6 percent of the global online population, and [79 percent of Americans](#) use Facebook, and its popularity is only continuing to grow. Facebook adds 500,000 new users every day, the equivalent of 6 new profiles every second. Potentially the most impactful social network used by your citizens, Facebook users spend an average of 20 minutes per day on the social networking site. That means Facebook is a tool that can be leveraged to effectively share relevant, urgent, breaking news or local alerts.

During an emergency, your local government's Facebook page can be used as a source of reliable news, instructions, and resources. Also, it's easy to post text, images, photos, maps, links, and downloadable content. In addition, Facebook offers built-in functionality that allows families to locate loved ones, and allows individuals in the crisis area to mark themselves as safe, making it one of the first places that people will go for news and personally impactful information during a crisis.



## Twitter

- **Usage:** [320 million users](#)
- **Purpose:** Twitter is a microblogging platform. It allows users to post and share short messages that are limited to 140 characters. These messages, called “tweets” can include links to external content or photos, and can incorporate hashtags (#) for users to find tweets on related, trending topics.
- **Benefits of Use During an Emergency:** Those who typically engage with Twitter are most likely to use the platform to comment on, or react to, breaking news. For this reason, Twitter serves as a sort of echo chamber, meaning that when news breaks, whether it be local news, national news, industry specific news, or breaking, emergency news, a user’s Twitter stream is likely to include a long list of tweets from users all of which are sharing, or reacting to, the same story.

## Communication Best Practices

Posting critical information to Facebook and Twitter provides not only an additional channel for reaching citizens who are already following your community’s social media presence, it enables citizens to share your message with their own followers, helping to extend the reach of your message to others

in your community. Consider these best practices for incorporating social media into your larger crisis communication plan during a natural disaster or community emergency:

### Preparation:

- If you haven’t already, develop a [proactive crisis communication plan](#) that includes a social media component.
- Develop social media guidelines, policies, and protocols for all staff members who will be assisting with communications before an event occurs.
- Even if you regularly only have one staff member in charge of managing social media for your local government, have a plan for a small team to assist with social media during a crisis. For example, appoint one staff member to post updates, one to answer questions from the public and the media, and another to fact check information and correct rumors.
- Familiarize yourself with social media platforms, social listening, and mass notification tools before a disaster occurs so that you are prepared to act quickly.
- Establish partnerships with local and national emergency response teams to share information and help spread joint communications.
- Create pre-written communication messages for possible emergency events, especially weather events, that can be distributed quickly. A mass notification solution that offers templated messages can help.
- Utilize a government content management system (CMS) with an integrated emergency warning system that allows you to send important communications to all your social media channels in a single step.
- Emergencies don’t just strike Monday through Friday from 9 – 5 while you’re sitting in your office, so use a CMS that enables you to craft and send messages from a mobile device.

- Choose a CMS that integrates with the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS is designed to help create and distribute local emergency notifications to your community through all the nation's available alert and warning channels, such as TV, AM/FM radios, WEA capable wireless devices, and NOAA weather radio.
- When the crisis and immediate recovery period have ended, take time to assess what went well, and where you can improve so that you can plan accordingly for future unexpected events.



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For more best practices on emergency communication management, [sign-up for the CivicPulse](#) from CivicPlus®, our monthly newsletter for local government leaders.

## Crafting Messages:

- The most important thing is to release the correct information. Even if it means a short delay, make sure that you validate all sources of information and that there are no errors or inconsistencies in your message.
- Keep messages short and actionable. Give citizens specific feedback such as the location of emergency shelters or road closure updates.
- Make sure the tone of all communications is calm and informative.
- Link to more detailed content, such as emergency evaluation maps or shelter lists.
- Include hashtags to amplify the reach of your message (e.g., #HurricaneMartha).
- Share and repost updates from other trusted organizational partners.
- Turn off scheduled social media posts that may be out of sync with the unexpected disaster. Your citizens will be visiting your social profiles to obtain emergency response information, and may find a scheduled message about an upcoming holiday parade out-of-place.
- Send updates frequently. One of the greatest benefits of social media is its instant impact. Citizens will be looking for continual updates, so keep tweets, posts, and shares of valuable news, information, and instruction coming frequently.
- Share updates consistently across relevant social media channels to mitigate the risk of mixed messages.
- Constantly monitor social media to stay in contact with impacted residents and maintain awareness of developing issues or needs.
- Continue to share updates even when an event has ended. Your citizens will be just as interested to learn about your community's recovery and clean-up progress.





## Social Media Use Case Study: The Joplin Tornado

Some forward-thinking communities have been using social media to communicate emergency news for several years. Learn how community response members in Joplin, Missouri utilized Facebook to keep citizens informed after a devastatingly deadly tornado.

On May 22, 2011, a catastrophic EF5 multiple-vortex tornado struck the community of Joplin, Missouri. The twister reached a maximum width of nearly one mile during its path through the southern part of the city. Tragically, 158 people were killed, and over 1,100 were injured, making the incident the deadliest tornado in American history since 1947.

Less than two hours after the tornado hit, the Facebook page “Joplin Tornado Info” was created to help those impacted to communicate with one another and with emergency responders, and to help friends and family members check on the wellbeing of those in the impacted area.

The page was launched at 7:36 p.m. on Sunday, May 22, and the first post read, “St. John’s has been hit; that’s all we know for sure.” It was only a few words, but it was true information shared by a trusted source in the impacted area, and it gave a nation a place to start their dialogue. Volunteer administrators monitored and updated the Joplin Tornado Info Facebook page 24/7 for the first 3 weeks following the devastating event. All posts were verified beforehand to ensure accuracy and mitigate the chance of the spreading of any false news or unverified rumors.

During the days and weeks that followed the Joplin Tornado, the simple Facebook page, which was free to establish and took only a matter of minutes to create, was a critical component of the emergency response and recovery communications and was used to:

- Communicate needed resources.
- Locate friends and family.
- Allow individuals to make requests for, or offers of, equipment resources.
- Facilitate volunteer inquiries.
- Triage location recovery needs.
- Communicate the coordination of supplies such as fresh water depots, shelter, and clothing resources, and charging stations.

During the recovery period, the Joplin Tornado Info Facebook page was considered the go-to website for up-to-date, vetted news, information, and resources, and to connect with emergency responders. Every post, whether it be a request for aid, a question about locating family members, or a question of supplies was answered by dedicated staff, offering comfort, support, and care during an impossibly difficult, and tragic time for a devastated community.

## Conclusion

We can never predict local disasters, but we can prepare for them. By incorporating social media into your crisis communication plan, familiarizing yourself with key social platforms, and utilizing tools and technology to expedite multi-channel communications, you will be well prepared to keep citizens informed whenever disaster strikes.

## Additional Resources

For more information about utilizing social media during a local crisis, complete the [FEMA social media training online course](#).

## About the Author

CivicPlus is the integrated technology platform for local government, working with over 2,500 local governments including municipalities, counties, and municipal departments. CivicPlus has been selected by Inc. Magazine as "One of the Fastest-Growing Privately Held Companies in the U.S." since 2011. For more information visit [CivicPlus.com](#).



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